Is Dreiser's "The 'Genius'" Immoral?

By MERTON STARK YEWDALE.

IN order to determine whether or not a book is salacious and therefore a violation of the statute it is necessary to know the writer's purpose as well as the dividing line between a literary work of art and a frankly nasty book.

Immoral books might be classed under three heads, namely, those that are written with a direct appeal to the baser passions, those that are written for a moral purpose, and those that are written solely for the purpose of art.

Among the first are such books as *Stolen Sweets*, *The Confessions of Maria Monk*, &c. This sort of work appeals primarily to the ignorant and unenlightened, and, in fact, is not to be classed as literature.

Second, we have such books as recent studies by Reginald Kauffman and others. Literature is used for the purpose of inculcating a moral lesson by holding up to the public the unpleasant aspects of vice. Of all such books and plays that have been written few take rank as great literature. In nearly every case the purpose of the novel or play is perverted and sacrificed to the moral object. The literary side of the work becomes negligible.

"The 'Genius'" Purely Artistic.

In the third class of books may be accounted *The "Genius"* and hundreds of volumes of the ancient classics which were written for purely literary purposes. It is not necessary to institute a comparison between *The "Genius"* and accredited works of genius, nor is it necessary to cite instances of immorality in such works to justify their presence in the book under discussion. In order to determine whether or not *The "Genius"* is merely a book of filth or a work of literary art we have only to apply certain principles applicable not only to literary work but to music, painting and sculpture.

The purpose of pure fiction is to stimulate the æsthetic sense. It is true that the novel has been used for so-called high moral purposes, for the exposition of various theories of government, for the alleviation of social suffering and for the discussion of problems of ethics; but these are, strictly speaking, not functions of the novel. They should be only incidental to it. They more often than not hurt the literary value of the work. Before proceeding with the discussion we ought to explain what is meant by the æsthetic sense and how a work of art appeals to it.

The Touchstone Is a Sixth Sense.

The æsthetic sense is merely understanding and appreciation of the fine arts. Those that have it know it, but it is therefore difficult to explain what it is to those who have it not. Let us use some comparisons that may be understood by everybody.

Great works of art stimulate the æsthetic sense. This sense is stirred and developed by reading a fine book, by hearing fine music and by viewing fine painting and sculpture. Perhaps the closest analogy is the feeling that almost every one has when he looks at Niagara, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado or the Rocky Mountains. Hardly any one has looked upon these great works of nature without a thrill. If the precise feeling could be analyzed it would be found to consist of complete absorption in a work outside one's self and a work nobler and more enduring than one's self. We feel immensity at the same time that we realize how insignificant we are.

Now that is the nearest approach to the æsthetic feeling that many a person ever makes, and no person can come nearer unless he be gifted with this sixth sense. Some people get a thrill from a sunset from a sunrise, from the wide expanse of the ocean. Those having the æsthetic sense get it also from art.

The three elements which go to the creation of all great literary work are form, organization and rhythm. By form we mean that the author creates his characters. He gives an account of their hereditary traits, environmental influences, natural predilections, &c. He describes them in physical detail to give us the feeling that a real flesh and blood person is before us. We must feel solidity in the characters.

After the characters are created in the mind of the novelist he traces their lives through various vicissitudes. This is organization of the material.

Rhythm, which is the third step in the novel, consists in bringing the characters into relation with each other and in relating events with other events. This compacted mass of human relation is what gives the story its dynamism—a technical term for "punch."

The Irrelevancy of "Plot."

It will be noticed that nothing has thus far been said about the plot, for the reason that in all great fiction the plot is negligible. In fact, where there is no plot there is rather likely to be literary merit. Now the reason for the absence of a plot in a great work of art is that it interferes with the logical working out of the destinies of the characters.

The presence of a plot obliges the novelist to make concessions here and there so that the plot will work out. Absence of a plot permits him to allow the people of the story to develop in accordance with their natural characters.

The true novelist sees life before his eyes as a pageant. He merely notes what he sees passing. If it be immorality he records it; if it be sanctity he also notes it; and it will be observed that in all great works of literary art the novelist rarely passes an opinion on the actions or the speeches of his characters. In other words, he places the people and situations before us and lets us draw our own conclusions or morals, if we choose.

Let us apply these principles to *The "Genius."* The book does not come under the head of books written and published for the purpose of appealing to a base mind. There is no internal evidence that the book was intended to be a moral lesson showing that the wages of sin is death, nor are there any opinions expressed by the author as to justification of the immorality. He simply records what happens to a man who is an artist and of a certain makeup; and he lets it rest there.

As for form, which, as we have said, is the creating of character, in no other specimens of American letters is there more careful attention given to detail than in the books of Theodore Dreiser. The only man who even approaches him is the late David Graham Phillips. With tireless attention to physical detail, Dreiser builds up his characters until they give us the sensation of perfect solidity; so much so, in fact, that it has been said by eminent critics that he writes fiction like fact. There is not a single character in *The "Genius"* that does not impress one as being well rounded and containing the depth that is necessary to solidity.

After the characters have been created Dreiser furnishes the various situations of life in which they appear, starts his people on their way and organizes his vast amount of material like a man putting a great charge into a powerful gun.

The dynamic force of the novel becomes apparent when the lives of the characters are brought into contact and the relation of events is established.

The Marks of Greatness.

Without asserting Dreiser's greatness it is incontestable that his works bear the marks of greatness. Not only are they conceived on a colossal scale, but they are devoid of all moralizing, speculating and preaching, and aim to give a huge panorama of life as it expands to the sight.

The characters are ones that people in any walk of life might meet, and they fulfil their destinies in a natural and logical way without the guidance of the novelist.

Those that are immoral continue to be immoral; those that are moral remain so. Whether or not we admire the characters, we feel that they are powers either for good or evil, and that every one of them is contributing something to life. They are all fed into the cosmic hopper.

Only to thinking people can *The "Genius"* appeal, and not to all of them. To those who put the construction of the novel after the plot and the incidental accounts of immoralities the book may be of no interest; but to those who see the careful way in which the characters develop under the hand of the novelist and who can sense the form, organization and rhythm of the book the appeal will be instantaneous.

It has been urged that this book is detrimental to the morals of the young and might have a bad effect upon people with a weak moral sense; but are thousands of perfectly normal and responsible people to be denied this form of art simply because it may be harmful to others? It has not been established that the book has done harm to any one; it has only been stated that it might do them harm if they read it.

As a matter of fact only people of culture and education pay any attention to the works of such writers as Dreiser. The general public never becomes interested until its attention is called to what may be a salacious morsel.

In the case of *The "Genius"* American letters are on trial, and the literary world will watch with interest the verdict. It is earnestly hoped that to every honest mind will come the conviction that *The "Genius"* is a work of literary excellence and that, as such, its suppression would be an act harmful to American literature if only by the weight of the precedent and the force of the example.

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